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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LIBREVILLE 000056

SIPDIS

PARIS, LONDON AND LISBON FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/12/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [CASC](#) [GB](#) [TP](#)
SUBJECT: SAO TOME AND PRINCIPE: COUP PLOT FOILED?

REF: LIBREVILLE 0325

Classified By: Poloff Leslie Doumbia for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) According to information trickling out of Sao Tome and Principe (STP), security forces thwarted a suspected coup plot by arresting several suspects on the evening of February 11. Information is sketchy, but initial reports indicate that the former paramilitary group known as the Buffalos was targeted in the arrests. Security forces were also deployed around the presidential palace, closing some streets. The Buffalos, who are also the prime backers of the Christian Democratic Front (FDC) political party, were responsible for the week-long, bloodless attempted coup that rocked the small island country in July 2003. There has been no official confirmation of the arrests and no reports of any violence or casualties. Business in the city for the most part continues as usual. END SUMMARY.

NOT THIS TIME

¶2. (C) According to available information, STP security forces launched a coordinated pre-emptive strike against the Buffalos on the evening of February 11. Armed soldiers and police reportedly surrounded the home of the leader of the group, Alercio Costa, where they apprehended 16 of the 21 known suspects and seized knives and machetes. Sources say that the coordinated action came following rumors of a coup, and possible assassination attempt, against President de Menezes and Prime Minister Rafael Branco. The President allegedly called a meeting of the Commanders of the Police, Presidential Guard and Defense Ministry earlier in the day to plan the joint operation. Costa has denied the accusations against him and his supporters.

¶3. (C) The Buffalos, a former paramilitary group of Sao Tomean soldiers trained by the South African military for service during the Angolan civil war, were responsible for the week-long, bloodless coup that rocked the small island country in July 2003. The Buffalos then claimed to be protesting the dire conditions in the army. Bowing to international pressure, the Buffalos ceded power back to the democratically elected president, de Menezes, after only a week. The Buffalos were granted amnesty for their involvement in the coup and have since formed a political party, the Christian Democratic Front (FDC). The group has also reportedly been "bought off" with grants of land and other benefits. In any case, the Buffalos now own property, a casino and a store. Some observers say these resources may have helped finance the latest exploits. An embassy employee

in Sao Tome also says he has credible eyewitness reports of Buffalos providing some kind of paramilitary training to young recruits.

BUSINESS AS USUAL...ALMOST

14. (C) There has so far been no official confirmation of the arrests, and no reports of any casualties. For the most part, business proceeded as usual in Sao Tome on February 12.

An embassy local employee tells us that many people on the street are not aware of the situation. The streets surrounding the presidential palace have been closed since the evening of February 11, however, with armed soldiers patrolling the area. Sao Tome's State Council also called an emergency meeting with the President for February 12 to discuss the situation further. Upon receipt of clearance from Washington, the Embassy will distribute a warden message urging American citizens to exercise caution and listen to radio reports.

COMMENT

15. (C) This incident, which appears at this time to be contained, ends a period of relative political stability that Sao Tome has experienced since the June 2008 formation of Prime Minister Branco's government (reftel) and a series of police mutinies beginning in late 2007. Prime Minister Branco's government was formed after a month of political

LIBREVILLE 00000056 002.2 OF 002

crisis, and following the collapse of his predecessor's three-month government. He, and president de Menezes, now face another crisis that will test the development of this fragile democracy.
REDDICK